Role of Indian Diaspora in South Africa – Recent Developments

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Introduction

India's cultural and commercial ties with Africa span over three millennia, with commerce predating cultural exchanges. While modern migration to Africa is largely linked to colonialism, the Indian diaspora in South Africa has deep roots, particularly from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, when Indians were brought as indentured labourers by the British to work on sugar plantations. Over the past 160 years, the Indian-origin community has become integral to South Africa's socio-economic and political fabric.

Indians migrated to Africa in two primary capacities: a) As indentured workers in the sugarcane farms of South Africa's KwaZulu Natal province, and b) As small traders establishing businesses. Between 1829 and 1924, around 769,437 Indians migrated to Mauritius, South Africa, Seychelles and East Africa. These migrants later became integral to their host countries, especially in post-colonial Africa, playing key roles in the political and economic spheres.

Mahatma Gandhi's 21 years in South Africa were transformative, where he developed his principles of non-violence and civil disobedience. The long list of prominent anti-apartheid icons of Indian heritage in South Africa includes his granddaughter, Ela Gandhi, Fatima Meer, Ahmed Kathrada, Amina Cachalia, and Frene Ginwala, to name a few. Post-apartheid, the Indian diaspora remains influential in South Africa's governance, particularly within the ruling African National Congress.

Diaspora migration is often driven by socio-economic, climate, demographic, and political factors, with migrants carrying their socio-cultural heritage and forming distinct identities in their host countries. This article explores the dynamic interactions between the Indian diaspora and South Africa and offers policy recommendations to strengthen India's ties with its diaspora in Africa.

India's Role in Africa - Recent Trends

Since its independence in 1947, India has positioned itself as a self-reliant power with a vision of global

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respect and influence, which aligns closely with its engagement with Africa. India's Africa policy emphasises mutual development, not a donor-recipient dynamic, underscoring equal partnerships and shared growth. This partnership model is distinct from many Western countries, focusing on capacity-building and resilience, with India assisting Africa in areas such as defence, security, education, and infrastructure.

India has prioritised self-sufficiency in African security assistance by deploying Indian technicians and providing essential hardware such as offshore patrol craft and combat helicopters. India focuses on creating space to work together as equals, enabling the African side to exert agency and leadership roles.

At the G20 Summit in New Delhi (September 2023), the African Union was granted full membership. Calling Africa "India's top priority," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, *"When we use the term 'Global South,' it is not just a diplomatic term. … In our shared history, we have together opposed colonialism and apartheid. It was on the soil of Africa that Mahatma Gandhi used powerful methods of non-violence and peaceful resistance. It is on this strong foundation of history that we are shaping our modern relations."*

India's role in Africa extends beyond government-to-government relations, with extensive engagement through the Indian diaspora. India's USD70 billion investment in Africa, led by the Confederation of Indian Industry, aims to reach USD150 billion by 2030. The Indian community in Africa, particularly in countries like South Africa, plays a pivotal role in education, trade, health, and industrialisation. As India's third-largest trading partner, after the EU and China, India-Africa trade has seen an 18% annual growth since 2003, reaching USD103 billion in 2023. The ongoing collaboration in sectors such as renewable energy, education, and healthcare continues to shape the future of India-Africa relations. Initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area and NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development) enhance these partnerships.

India's technical cooperation programs, such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) initiative, have trained over 200,000 African professionals. India's Pan African e-Network connects 54 African nations with India, facilitating cooperation in telecoms, medicine, and e-governance. This network, coupled with projects like the Solar Mamas, underscores India's commitment to Africa's sustainable development.

The Indian Diaspora: A Bridge between India and Africa

The Indian diaspora is an integral part of Africa's socio-economic landscape. With approximately 3 million Indian-origin individuals living across 46 of 54 African countries, the Indian diaspora accounts for 13 % of India's global diaspora. Many have acquired citizenship in their host countries and hold influential positions, making them key players in strengthening India-Africa relations.

Over the years, Indian diaspora communities have fostered development in host nations, creating mutually beneficial transnational ties. These partnerships, supported by governments, international organisations, and industries, drive economic growth, poverty reduction, and social progress. Their contributions are particularly evident in local economic projects and capacity-building efforts.

The knowledge economy has spurred mobility, particularly among Indian scientists, contributing to the development of human capital and the risk of brain drain. To mitigate this, India has implemented strategies to engage its scientific diaspora in African capacity-building initiatives, fostering knowledge exchange to boost science, technology, and innovation systems in low-income countries.

Indian scientific diasporas have become vital to addressing global challenges, advising African nations and supporting policies for their development. Although these diaspora-led efforts are not always aligned

with India's official science diplomacy strategies, the need for policies to formalise this cooperation is clear, particularly in sectors like education, health, and capacity building.

The Indian diaspora is particularly concentrated in South Africa, with 1.7 million people, especially in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces. Known for their rich cultural traditions, they have significantly contributed to the country's political, social, and economic spheres. South African Indians, though diverse in religion, caste, and language, maintain strong cultural identities and play a critical role in the nation's political process.

The influence of Indian communities varies across Africa, with South Africa's Indian diaspora particularly dominant in politics and business, while other countries also benefit from their contributions to local development.

Conclusions

India's migration to Africa has evolved from a colonial-era labour force to a vibrant diaspora that plays a significant role in the cultural and economic integration of the two regions. Indian communities in Africa, particularly South Africa, have helped build a strong foundation for bilateral relations, contributing to governance, education, and business. India's collaboration with African nations has moved beyond aid, focusing on mutual development through capacity building and sustainable partnerships. As India's engagement with Africa continues to grow, the role of the diaspora remains pivotal in strengthening ties and promoting India's strategic and economic interests across the continent. Today, Indian Diaspora in South Africa constitutes about 3 % of the total population of South Africa, covering major linguistic, cultural or geographical areas of India (mainly Tamil and Hindi speaking).

Indian diasporas have an embedded disposition to reach out to their home governments and link them to the Indian Government and private sector. However, Indian and African leaders exerting efforts in areas of cooperation with greater interest in working together in this domain. Indian private sector should also diversify into innovative areas in Africa in addition to the traditional sectors like pharmaceuticals, education, and agriculture.

It is imperative that the development of the Indian partnership with Africa be guided by African priorities, as India believes in the unique philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam* (the world as one family). India needs to build as much local capacity and create as many local economic opportunities as possible for the unique people of Africa. The Indian diaspora will undoubtedly remain a key player in facilitating this relationship, enhancing both India's and Africa's global standing in the years to come.